



Consumer Communities Do Well, But Will They Do Good? A Study of Participation in Distributed Computing Projects

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Abstract

Brand communities and corporate social responsibility have been touted for their ability to both generate significant equity for their brands and strong bonds among community members. However, the reciprocal capacity of these brands to mobilize their followers to engage in prosocial behavior, while very promising, has been largely ignored by researchers and practitioners alike. Given the untapped potential of product aficionados, who are said to possess considerable knowledge, expertise, and engagement, this lack of research and managerial guidance is somewhat perplexing. To address this shortcoming, we conducted a longitudinal investigation of two brand communities and one non-brand based product category community drawn from five years of data from a scientific crowdsourcing project aimed at curing medical diseases, such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and AIDS. Employing a hazard modeling approach, we find that contrary to conventional wisdom, brand community participation reduces the likelihood of joining, while participation in a non-brand based product category community increases the likelihood of joining, a prosocial distributed computing project. Furthermore, willingness to help fellow community members plays an important role in the likelihood to join. These findings provide important insights for firms seeking to engage product category and brand communities in prosocial causes.

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Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a well-established business imperative and a critical business strategy (Porter and Kramer 2006). CSR is broadly defined as a company's activities and status relative to its societal or stakeholder obligations (Brown and Dacin 1997). Though CSR is multifaceted, a common aspect typically involves discretionary company participation in prosocial causes (Carroll 1979). Consumers are increasingly becoming more demanding of their brands. Many consumers want to know that the brands they use are engaging

in prosocial behaviors and supporting causes important to them (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004). According to a recent global study, if given the opportunity, 72% of consumers are willing to volunteer for a cause supported by a company they trust (Cone 2015). Therefore, brand sponsorships can serve as a stimulus for advocacy of charitable causes, raising donations and spurring volunteer involvement. Furthermore, CSR can prompt some consumers to identify with the brand, enhancing favorable brand attitudes and strengthening customer loyalty (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig 2004). As Aggarwal (2004) notes, "Consumer-brand interactions...extend beyond mere utilitarian benefits to what is perceived as the right thing to do in that relationship" (p. 87). So in addition to considering factors such as product quality when choosing a brand, consumers may evaluate the prosocial behaviors that brands are engaging in or the consumer-brand relationships that might be engendered by choosing one brand over another.

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Consumer–brand relationships can be strengthened through participation in brand and consumer communities. Consumers participate in brand and consumer communities to build relationships with fellow consumers and devotees of the brand (e.g., [Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001](#)), and to learn how to use valued products more effectively ([McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002](#)). These communities are a significant strategic asset for brands, as they are linked to diverse positive outcomes ([Luo and Bhattacharya 2009](#)).

Considering the scope and importance of consumer–brand relationships, not only for the brand and the consumer, but for the social good being pursued, we examine two key research questions. First, can brands leverage their relationships with consumers in their brand communities to mobilize them to engage in prosocial behaviors? Second, how do consumer communities that are not built around a specific brand, but rather at a general product category level, affect consumers’ willingness to participate in prosocial causes? When a brand supports community members’ prosocial activities and the prosocial engagement truly *belongs* to the brand, then we would expect the brand to be able to encourage members to participate in other causes as well. However, what if this prosocial engagement is simply an artifact of the communal interaction? If the prosocial engagement essentially belongs to the consumer community members themselves, and not to the brand, then brand communities would not provide a reliable means of engaging community members in CSR activities. Thus, our research investigates whether consumers perceive stronger relational ties with one another or with the brand, and how this might change over time.

These research questions are of importance to both firms and the prosocial causes they support given that firms are increasingly asking brand and consumer communities to donate not just their money, but also the use of their products and their expertise, to support the firms’ CSR initiatives. For example, Harley-Davidson’s popular “Ride For A Cure” entails Harley-Davidson owners asking friends to sponsor a ride and riding in groups in support of the Muscular Dystrophy Association ([T.J. Martell Foundation 2012](#)). Similarly, IBM serves as a corporate sponsor of World Community Grid, a non-profit organization that encourages computer enthusiasts to use their unused computing power to advance scientific research on topics related to health, poverty, and sustainability. In addition, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft are corporate supporters of Hour of Code, a program that asks software developers to help American schools modernize their computer science curriculum by organizing school events, offering small group tutorials, and participating in team solution exercises. As evidenced by these examples, the success of these CSR initiatives depends on the active and direct involvement of members of the related communities.

These initiatives sit at the nexus of prominent business practices, namely consumer community engagement and corporate social responsibility. They provide consumer groups the opportunity to build relationships with fellow consumers, a sense of community ([McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002](#)), and a stronger sense of social identification with the brand and community ([Hogg and Abrams 2003](#)). In addition, prosocial activities which require consumers to actively donate

their own time and effort directly tend to provide greater emotional benefits to consumers than do less direct prosocial activities ([Krishna 2011](#)). Activities of this nature should therefore simultaneously create benefits for the brand, consumer, and social cause being endorsed. However, previous research has not empirically examined the capacity of brands to mobilize consumers to “do good” or to participate actively and directly in nonproprietary prosocial causes.

This study draws theoretical and conceptual underpinnings from social identity theory and its respective linkages with consumer–brand relationships and consumer communities to investigate how product category and brand communities can be leveraged by firms to produce prosocial participation in CSR causes. To our knowledge, this is the first study that examines consumer communities and corporate social responsibility at both individual brand and general product category levels. Review of the relevant literature reveals that there are conflicting scholarly research studies concerning how brand communities can be used as instruments of social good. The current ambiguity brings into question the potential value of brand communities to serve as a strategic asset for CSR activities. Our primary managerial objective is to provide guidance to marketers attempting to evaluate which brands have customer bases with the greatest potential to “do good” and which consumers within these groups to target.

Next, we present the conceptual background of our study. We then describe our research method, which is based on five years of data from Stanford University’s Folding@home project—a scientific crowdsourcing program aimed at curing medical diseases, such as AIDS, ALS, Parkinson’s, and Alzheimer’s, by securing consumer support for using consumers’ computer hardware to form a distributed supercomputer. We analyzed consumer data taken from three different online community forums devoted to three-dimensional (3D) graphics cards: (1) NVIDIA brand community (2,501 members); (2) ATI brand community (5,874 members); and (3) product category community (6,823 members). We conclude with our findings with respect to theory and practice and share potential areas for future research.

Conceptual Framework

Consumer–Brand Relationships

Although value considerations are important for a brand’s success, there has been a shift in marketing practice and research towards an emphasis on the relational nature of consumer interactions with a brand ([Fournier 1998](#)). The relational orientation of consumers can be seen in the importance of consumer–brand constructs such as personality ([Aaker 1997](#)), the notion of fit in brand extensions ([Aaker and Keller 1990](#)), or even how consumers view brand alliances. In short, many consumers relate to brands, have clear expectations for how the brand should “behave” across different situations, and evaluate brands based on their conforming to perceived relational norms ([Aggarwal 2004](#)). These expectations are analogous to the relational norms that exist in social relationships, with

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